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Some Points For Consideration of Technicians Working With Villagers

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SOME POINTS FOR CONSIDERATION OF TECHNICIANS WORKING WITH VILLAGERS ¹

by

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Successful technical cooperation programs rest largely upon human relations. It is well known that it is not easy to get people who most need assistance to believe that any benefits from it will come to them; it is therefore of first importance that technicians working with the rank and file people help them to see how they themselves can benefit by their joint efforts in self-help projects. It is often not easy for technicians to establish rapport and work effectively with villagers. The following points are based on first-hand experiences in recent years in technical cooperation programs abroad, and, before that, in rural improvement programs in the Southern States.

¹ These points are based on experiences prior to 1946 in the Southern States, in 1947-1950 in Japan on three consultations dealing with agrarian reforms, and since with ICA and predecessor agencies: as Consultant for MSA and FOA in Southeast Asia in 1951-1952; as Project Evaluation Advisor for FOA in Formosa, 1952-1954; Consultant to the Community Development Division, ICA/W, late 1954 to mid-1955; Regional Community Development Advisor in the Middle East for ICA, July 1955 - October 1957; and since then in ICA/W working with the Training Development Staff of the Deputy Director of Technical Services, and in the Orientation and Counseling Branch of the Career Development Division of the Office of Personnel. Many of the points as they appear here, but in a different sequence, were presented in January 1960 in an address to the 8th Annual Fordham University Conference of Mission Specialists, N. Y.

They are concrete suggestions dealing with the difficult matter of how the technician, whether an advisor from outside or a local person, can best make use of such skills as he has where they are most needed, namely among the vast village populations of developing countries:

Be sure Your Presence in the Village is Understood.

The technician will need to enter the village under the right sponsorship, usually the village head, or some other recognized local leader; he may need, prior to his arrival at the village, to have his coming arranged for through the district and provincial offices. But no amount of distant clearances can compensate for local explanations of why the technician is in the village. It is unusual for a stranger to be in a small community for even an hour without his presence needing to be vouched for to the populace by local leaders.

Find a Basis for Common Interest with the Villagers.

Common ground can usually be found despite the cultural gap and the language barrier, if the technician shows appreciation of the villagers as individuals. He can listen when they talk, and look with interest at what they show him. Initial conversations will usually center around one or more such universal matters as food, shelter, clothing, health and education; and in time discussion can be naturally brought around to the matter the technician wants the villagers to consider. The technician will be all the better received if he knows something about earlier contributions of the country where he is working in such matters as agriculture, folk art, religion, architecture, and so on; also, he will be all the more appreciated if he can speak the local language.

Try to Understand Why They Do Things the Way They Do.

What may at first seem like strange and non-sensible practices generally have good reasons behind them, which the technician can discover, though not infrequently a creative imagination helps. Gleaners in the Near East, for example, operate within a folk framework somewhat akin to the present Social Security programs

in Western countries. Food habits, family traditions, folk cures, and festive celebrations nearly always have a great deal of human experience back of them. The technician will need to be alert, too, to the fact that many a village is characterized by rival subgroups, factions; these he will need to reckon with in working with the local people. Factionalism (in its most intense expression, feuds) in the village, as in small isolated groups generally, seemingly serves to lessen the monotony and boredom of everyday life.

Start Where the People Are, and with What They Want.

The lives of the villagers are usually rather simple and realistic, and first new wants are little in advance of where they are now. It will be rewarding for the technician to take time to find out what the local people really want most and to work with them to get it. They may want a public school, or a road, when he thinks they most need a well, or a clinic. The need they feel is usually his best starting point, for then the people are appreciative and cooperative, begin to raise their sights and so will all the sooner be interested in working with their fellow villagers for other improvements. To service the initial desires of the people, the technician may need to call in some other technician whose skills match the particular project wanted by the villagers. By following this course, he, a bit delayed, gets the full cooperation in the project in which he is interested; whereas, if he presses for it at first despite the desires of the villagers, he will at best get only half-hearted response, and may put technical activity in a bad light in the locality.

Work within the Cultural Framework of the People.

The technician will need to understand such basic cultural matters as the ethnic backgrounds of the people, family relationships, leadership patterns, value systems, and the technological level of the people as related to ways of making a living and of being serviced in such matters as health, education, and communications (including transportation). So many things will depend upon the technician's realism in the cultural field—for instance, the extent to which locally available physical resources can be used,

the most effective way to launch a training activity, or the part that women and youth can be expected to take (or not take) in a developmental activity. He will need to know and appreciate the local signs, and signals — in short the "do's" and "don'ts" of the people.

Note, and Respect, the Pace of the Villagers.

The technician, whether local or from the outside, will tend to become impatient with the slowness with which the villagers respond; and so he will often be inclined to step in and move the project forward. Getting a village developmental activity underway is not a simple matter, for the villagers are accustomed to following traditional ways of doing things, and are ill at ease when faced with practices strange to them. It is worth emphasizing that no small part of the villagers' pace is the time it takes for them to formulate their questions, and for the answers to be understood by them; for the villagers will want to know the end result of the new action before they are willing to undertake it. In this whole complex matter of introducing a new practice, the technician will do well to play the learner's role, to listen more than he talks, for only so can he achieve sufficient identification with the villagers to perceive the various considerations that account for their pace, considerations that he must know if he is to influence local developmental activities in an acceptable manner.

Take Care that the Reactions of the Villagers Are Understood.

Not infrequently a technician may think his efforts are being appreciated, when in fact he is merely being treated politely; or that he is getting an affirmative answer when he is merely being assured that his question is understood. Villagers generally dislike to be unpleasant or in any way cause an outsider to "lose face", or otherwise be uncomfortable. John Embree, in a memo prepared shortly before his untimely death, called specific attention to this matter; he called it the "'yes' problem". Misunderstandings are usually reduced to a minimum when the activity serviced by the technician, as emphasized earlier, centers around basic needs of the local people as defined by themselves.

Help the People Believe They Can Improve Their Own Situation.

The vast majority of the villagers of Asia and Africa have long lived in a more or less static situation. Through experience, they have come to have more fear of losing status through change, than they have hope for bettering their condition through change. Therefore, a suggested change is often looked upon with fear. Concrete local projects which yield easily observed benefits are helpful in convincing the villagers that they can improve their situation, and so make them more willing cooperators in self-help projects.

Be Content with Small Beginnings.

First changes nearly always come slowly in areas where there have been but few in recent times. It is good to remember that, historically speaking, scientific development in the West has occurred but recently. The technician should keep in mind that knowledge, whether technical or otherwise, is cumulative, and that once a small beginning has been made, greater activity and changes will likely follow; but remember, it is easier to achieve momentum than it is to maintain it. The important thing then is to get a start made, within as promising a framework as possible, and with the support needed to sustain the momentum achieved.

Utilize the Villagers' Own Organizations, and Recognize Their Leaders.

Village people, as people everywhere, respond best when their local organizations are recognized as important and useful. A village program can hardly succeed except it be carried forward within the local organizational framework, and except the recognized local leaders be consulted and encouraged to make such contributions as they can. A well-conceived technical activity will reflect credit on the leaders associated with it; attention will often also need to be given to the quiet behind-the-scenes leaders, no less than to officials and the family heads of local groups. Naturally enough, the surest way for an activity to be continued after the technician leaves, is for it to have been launched and carried forward within the villagers' own organizational and leadership framework.

Encourage Individuals to Assume Responsibility, and Involve as Many as Possible.

The technician can be most effective in a program only when the local people assume responsibility, and so are afforded the opportunity to learn as fast as they can. The responsible participation of the people is an integral part of any successful local technical activity. Only through the active involvement of the people will they be induced to contribute from their understanding the insights needed to relate the activity constructively to local conditions, and only so will the people have reason to change to the suggested new ways of doing things.

Be Short on Making Promises, and Long on Keeping the Ones that Are Made.

Technicians may unwittingly give the impression that a wider range of assistance can be given than is feasible, or even than may be desirable. It is important that the technician, in conference with the villagers, learn what the one or two most important activities are that may be launched. After local agreement is reached as to the most desirable project, and how technical assistance can best be rendered, the villagers need to see by concrete accomplishments that the promises made by the technician are being kept. Also, the technician must bear in mind that he actually generates unrest when he raises hopes beyond fulfillment; that he is doing his job best when he helps the villagers realize that they can raise their level of living by some specific project, and that he is ready and able to help them begin to get it underway.

Make Certain that Technical Benefits Accrue at the Local Level.

Care must be taken that the benefits of a technical assistance project accrue at the local level, lest the rank and file people have no real interest in it. A project for larger crop production, for example, is convincing to family members only when it is clear that they themselves will receive appreciable and continuing benefits from the larger production. It is well to emphasize

that in many a developing country, where control is in the hands of a few powerful families, unless care is taken at this point, technical activity may increase rather than decrease the already great differences between the level of living of the ruling group and the remainder of the population. Before-and-after socio-economic surveys in selected locality areas is a feasible way to document the extent to which benefits from technical activities are reaching the rank and file villagers.

Help the Government Get Organized to Serve the Village People.

For the technician to be most effective he must ever be mindful of the government set-up, and how the activity in which he is interested fits into the overall scheme of things. If there is not already a set of agreements between subject-matter Ministries, usually through some sort of inter-ministerial council which provides for coordinated effort in servicing the varied needs of the local people, the technician, as appropriate, should in company with other technicians assist in helping get such agreements made; if such agreements do exist he should be careful to recognize and strengthen them, for the work of the technician in one field is most meaningful only when properly related to the supplemental contributions of technicians in other fields.

Train and Use Sub-Professional Multi-Purpose Village Workers.

Selected young people in the villages can be trained and used as sub-professional multi-purpose village workers to enable the scarce technician to make the best use of his time as a technician; otherwise the technician of necessity spends much of his time, not in functioning as a technician, but in establishing and maintaining enough rapport with the villagers to render any technical service at all. The gap between the villagers and the technician is usually a formidable one because of the great educational and cultural differences between them, for most of the villagers are poor, illiterate, and often with few or no outside contacts. Volunteer or paid local workers (who serve as liaison between the villagers and the technicians) have proven of great help in getting the benefits of subject-matter technical activities

to the local people. Many national governments have been impressed with results, and so are now trying to arrange for all types of technical aid to be made available to all villages. Field experience has clearly demonstrated that there is no shortage of young people in the villages of Asia and Africa who are eager to be trained and used in local developmental activities. The training of a village worker is two-fold: to teach him (or her) the many simple things he can do to help the villagers help themselves; and to help him understand what he himself cannot do, and how to call in technicians as needed.

Expect Growing Pains.

As the villagers, on the basis of their own successes from their joint efforts, begin to have new hope they naturally want a larger hand in matters. The technician may sometimes feel they are wanting to assume more responsibility than they are able to carry. These evidences of growing pains should be appreciated, for they are a necessary part of becoming able to assume responsibility; they indicate that the villagers are beginning to believe they can do more and more things for themselves. The technician who is not prepared to adjust himself to these growing desires of the villagers to help themselves should not have responsibility in the servicing of local self-help projects.

Transfer Controls Constructively.

The matter of institution building is a challenge to the technician. He needs to help the local people see how they can build the new (that they want) upon the foundations of the old (that they already have). From the beginning of a project the technician needs to have envisioned, at least roughly, and to have discussed with local leaders the various types of training of local personnel needed, the means by which needed financial support can be had, and the several progressive transfers of responsibilities that are to be made before the full operation of the activity can be relinquished. How can the technician know the timing of withdrawal best related to local conditions such as personality characteristics, value systems, and so on? If he hands over the operating responsibility too early there will likely be some breakage, as it

were, usually of material things; it is important to note that the cost of such breakage can usually be charged more or less to training. If, on the other hand, he keeps his control too long, the local people who have been wanting to take over may become disillusioned with him, or even hate him, for not relinquishing control to them when they thought it should have been turned over to them. This delayed handing over of responsibility gets the problem out of the material level and into the psychological, if not spiritual, which is the more difficult to cope with. It must be clear to all, that the technician has the challenge of working out with local leaders the timing of the phasing out each technical activity that is started, for only so can institution building be institutionalized.

Don't Expect Thanks from the People Helped.

People who benefit from technical assistance are seldom in a position to be grateful. Rather, they are usually aware that they are making technical headway belatedly, and they may therefore tend to be somewhat on the defensive. In accepting assistance they in a sense admit their own insufficiency; a person's or community's or a nation's self-esteem is a precious thing. The technician therefore will not expect thanks, but rather will approach the villagers in a spirit of fraternity and humility, taking deep satisfaction in such progress as they may make and being quick to see that the credit rests with them. So, the technician should do his job in the villages the best he can, and rest in faith that his work well done is its own reward; and that insofar as other monuments may be needed mankind will, even if a bit belated, erect them in the right places and to the right people.

The full application of the above points rests upon yet another dimension, namely the need for the technician to achieve a working equality between himself and the people with whom he is working. One reason this dimension is so difficult to achieve is that the technician tends to assume he has achieved it already, when in fact he often has not adequately identified its components, many of them quite elusive. This final point warrants some detail:

Deal with the Villagers as Equals.

The U.S. technician, and let's let him be our central concern for a bit, feels that he has a natural bent towards equality, for he is the representative of a country that was new and developing only a relatively short time ago; that has a tradition of a successful revolution; that opportunities for individual success (or failure) are available for all; and his country's activities in technical fields abroad are highly cooperative in nature and so are accompanied by the training of local people to take over and operate the activities that are started.

As he works abroad, the technician will need to remember that many of the people in Asia and Africa have had colonial experiences and may fear that the technical program might somehow take over the role relinquished by the colonial powers. Furthermore, the villagers' overall experiences with officials and money lenders, their main white-collar contacts, have indelibly impressed upon them the likelihood of being treated as unequals by well-groomed and articulate people.

The American technician has the challenge of establishing an effective working relationship with the villagers; and he may be handicapped more than he may realize by the fact that he is a symbol of the strong helping the weak; the healthy helping the sick; the rich, the poor; the successful, the unsuccessful; the well informed, the poorly informed; the technically developed, the technically underdeveloped. Along with such pairs of concepts as these, which can be objectively documented and so are generally acknowledged as true by the technician and those with whom he is working are yet other pairs of concepts that are subjective in nature and can do great damage to rapport if not clearly understood, and as clearly disavowed, by the technician. If, because the quantitative concepts can be documented, the technician assumes, or is believed by those with whom he works to assume, the "truth" of certain qualitative concepts and the presence of resulting relations between himself and those with whom he deals, the technician will be faced with a real problem. The trouble-making concepts include, for example, wise and foolish; right and wrong; saved and unsaved; civilized and uncivilized.

These concepts of relationships, no less than that of master and servant, imply a basic inequality in individual worth. And any such implication, or inference, negates the rapport needed to accomplish the very end the technician seeks, namely the development of that greatest resource of all, the human resource.

The degree of identification between the technician and the people is a most important component in the achievement of a working equality between them. In actuality the technician will be able to accept as equals only those in whom he can see himself, though under a differing set of life circumstances. He can treat as an equal the bedouin or fellahin, the feudal lord or the serf, only when he comes to know that if he'd been "in the shoes" of any one of them all his life he'd be making a living in about the same way, speaking his language, singing his song, following his courtship and marriage customs, and responding to about the same set of fears and hopes. Such an identification, albeit vicarious, is not a superficial thing; it is learned through extended exposure and deep insights. The reverse, too, is important — namely that the technician helps the local people realize that they would be about like he is if they'd been in his shoes all their lives; such an identification becomes a dynamic change factor in the direction of technical activities that lead to improvements in local living conditions. A really important thing is happening when, through identification, the technician "understands" the people with whom he is working; and when they, looking at him, begin to believe that they can help change their own situation.

The news from nearly every daily paper in recent months challenges the American technician in public and private activities increasingly to give convincing performances of his real belief in democracy, of his real faith in people. To move ahead in his technical work he'll have to be convincing about equality, for who in this day of the rising hopes of peoples everywhere can be expected to be satisfied with any other relationship? He can't teach, or really help in any meaningful way, except on the basis of an understanding grounded in the equality of personal worth; for, only so can he arouse the individual interests and desires incident to learning and the personal endeavor which everywhere

are integral parts of socio-economic activities that lead to better local living conditions.

Fortunately, the joint efforts of the technician and the villagers in meeting a specific local felt need provide a basis for effectively working together despite differences in religion and value systems, despite differences in economic status and social position. This joint effort provides a framework in which the technician can make maximum use of his supportive backgrounds (a recently developed country, with a heritage of a successful revolution, a high value on class mobility, and an interest in helping other people help themselves). Conversely it reduces the inherent handicap in the marked national differences in wealth, health, education and technology. In short, the joint effort between technician and the villagers to effect a local improvement that is wanted — whether of a simple material type such as a pump or clinic, or a shift toward greater self-direction for the people in their own affairs — constitutes a working relationship that helps to overcome the superficial differences among men and so affirms equality, and brotherhood.

Whether the technician serves within a village worker system as described above or under some other administrative set-up, and at whatever level he works, he may with profit to his work be guided in his relationships with the villagers by the points listed above. For only so can he, the scarce and essential technician, serve so well the many needs of so many needy people — the villagers of developing countries.

The technical advisor, who may not often work directly with villagers, will find it helpful to keep the above points in mind when counseling officials who administer rural developmental activities.

